

Take a road trip to Tweetsie Railroad

By ALAN HODGE
Special to The Herald

Ready for a ride on a steam locomotive with a holdup to boot? Take a trip to Tweetsie Railroad in Blowing Rock.

Tweetsie is called "North Carolina's original theme park." A unique attraction, Tweetsie has plenty to amuse and thrill both children and adults. Open from May through November, Tweetsie railroad makes any season fun.

The heart of Tweetsie Railroad is the historic Old Number 12 steam engine. This locomotive originally hauled iron ore and lumber out of the North Carolina hills on the ET&WNC line. Locals took the railroad's acronym and made the phrase "Eat Taters and Wear No Clothes" from it to express their condition of poverty. Trains of the railway were known for their shrill whistle - hence the name "Tweetsie."

The ET&WNC operated from the late 1800s until 1940 when rains washed out a large portion of track. Another decade saw the line close down completely. Some of the ET&WNC equipment was sent by the U.S. Army to Alaska, some was moved to Central America, and other bits ended up on the scrap heap.

Saved from these fates by three railroad hobbyists, Number 12 was purchased and moved to Harrisonburg, Virginia and an amusement

park. The park's tracks washed out in Hurricane Hazel two years later and the engine was up for sale again.

The next person to buy Number 12 was cowboy singer Gene Autry. Incidentally, Autry was also interested in aviation. According to a story told by J.W. Goins of Belmont several years ago, Autry was the first person to break the sound barrier when he power-dived a P-47 Thunderbolt fighter plane at an airport near New York.

Anyway, Autry took delivery of Number 12 with plans to put it in a California park. When that endeavor failed, Number 12 was bought by Tar Heel Grover Robbins in 1956 for \$17,000.

Tweetsie arrived back in Hickory on a standard flat car in May of that year and was greeted by large crowds as well as Governor Luther Hodges. A special "Tweetsie Homecoming" celebration was also held. While the little engine was in Hickory, it was restored at the shops of Northwestern Railway Co.

Number 12 had originally been built by the Baldwin Locomotive Works in Philadelphia in 1917 at a cost of \$14,000. It was the last of the original 13 ET&WNC engines to survive. Number 12's dimensions are 54 feet long, 9 feet wide, and 12 feet tall. It weighs 80 tons. Power comes from a boiler 54 inch-



No. 12 crosses a 225-foot trestle over Dead Horse Creek at Tweetsie Railroad. Baldwin Locomotive Works of Philadelphia built the engine in 1917 at the cost of \$14,000. In 1992, the engine was placed in the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of Interior.

es in diameter. The tender's water tank holds 3,000 gallons and four tons of coal.

July 4, 1957 saw Tweetsie make its first run at the 400 acre park we know today. The tracks had been laid in a three mile circuit at Roundhouse Mountain and had a five percent grade, two deep cuts, and a thrilling 225 foot trestle over Dead Horse Creek.

The Wild West came to Tweetsie in the late 1950s when WBTV rented the park to hold a birthday party for

its star Fred Kirby. From that beginning, Kirby and his singing cowboy act were a Tweetsie regular until his death in 1996.

Today, Tweetsie offers train rides as well as a wide variety of other features. Attractions range from a railroad museum to carnival rides. There's also a shooting gallery, gold panning, chair lift, deer park, and blacksmith shop.

Other amusements include dancing at the Palace Saloon, arcade

games, antique cars, ice cream, and an old time jailhouse.

Tweetsie Railroad will also be holding a series of special events this year. Western Days are coming May 18-19 with the Saddle Pals reenactors. Come see Thomas the Tank Engine at Tweetsie May 31 through June 9. The mountain sky will light up with Tweetsie's Fireworks Extravaganza on Thursday, July 4. Two weeks later, July 13-14, Tweetsie Railroad will host a Magic

Festival. Look for Grammy-winning entertainers Riders in the Sky August 3-4.

Come cooler weather, Tweetsie Railroad will have the famous Ghost Train feature October 3-4, 11-12, 18-19, 25-26, and November 1-2.

Tweetsie Railroad is located right on Highway 321 between Boon and Blowing Rock. For more information on tickets, schedule, call 1-800-526-5740 or visit the website at www.Tweetsie.com

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